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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 YEREVAN 000118

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SUBJECT: ARMENIA: PRE-ELECTION TOUR OF ARARAT MARZ

Classified By: Classified By: Poloff Nigel De Coster, Reasons 1.4 (b,d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: On February 6, Embassy Officers traveled to Ararat Marz (region) to meet with local political leaders and opposition party representatives to discuss the Presidential election campaign scheduled for February 19. Embosffs visited key population centers of the region including Artashat (regional capital), Ararat city, Vedi, and Masis. Ararat is the home territory of Deputy Prime Minister (and Serzh Sargsian campaign manager) Hovik Abrahamian. A common theme arose from ruling party representatives that all was in order vis-a-vis the observance of election laws and provision of equal access to municipal resources for all political candidates. The story was quite different, however, from opposition party representatives who complained of interference by municipal authorities against their campaign. Embassy officers missed, by several hours, a scuffle between Levon Ter-Petrossian's election entourage and ice-throwing youth in Artashat city. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) DIVERGENT LOYALTIES: Ararat Marz, located just southeast of Yerevan, is the home turf of Hovik Abrahamian, who serves concurrently as Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Territorial Administration (which oversees the regional government structures), and campaign manager for Prime Minister Serzh Sargsian. The region also contains the home town of the late, assassinated Prime Minister Vazgen Sargsian, and of his brother Aram Sargsian, who now heads the pro-LTP opposition Republic Party (not to be confused with the ruling Republican Party).

"IT'S YOUR CHOICE" NGO

¶3. (U) Embosffs began their tour in the regional capital of Ararat Marz, Artashat, with a stop-off at the regional office of the NGO "It's Your Choice" (IYC), meeting IYC representative Ashot Sargsian. IYC is a prominent, nationwide election monitoring NGO, receiving USAID funding to conduct voter education, poll worker training, and election observation. Ashot Sargsian was pleased to report that IYC had six Long Term Observers (LTOs) in place in the Ararat region and that his organization was on track with its LTO and Short Term Observer (STO) training sessions -- all of whom are local Armenian citizens. He noted that for each of the 151 polling stations in the region, two STOs from IYC would be

present on election day. In addition, he informed Emboffs that he had visited various villages in the region and had conducted successful voter training sessions and mock elections in public schools.

13. (C) On more than one occasion Sargsian said he had had to reassign STO responsibilities after discovering that the original selectees had a political affiliation. Sargsian also stated that he had heard of instances of voter intimidation and election violations, but when he tried to investigate these incidents, few if any of those involved agreed to provide detailed information. In addition, he noted that the office space he had rented for IYC's training activities was rendered unusable due to lack of proper heating.

GOVERNOR HEADS PM'S REGIONAL ELECTION CAMPAIGN

14. (C) Emboffs met with the seven-year governor (marzpet) of Ararat Marz, Alik Sargsian, who simultaneously heads Serzh Sargsian's regional election campaign. Sargsian stated that he was making efforts to give all presidential candidates equal access to the region's public facilities. This included use of Artashat's public square just in front of the Marzpet's office. He stated that Orinats Yerkir candidate Artur Baghdasaryan had already campaigned in Ararat and would be returning in the near future. In addition, he expected a visit of Levon Ter-Petrosyan (LTP) to the central square of Artashat. When asked about the planned arrival of Serzh Sargsian, he mentioned that an event had been organized on

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February 14 to conveniently coincide with a local festival in which the city mayor gives presents to the newly-wed couples of the region. In this festival, the PM was to give out the presents.

15. (C) Commenting on his dual-hatted position of Marzpet and head of the Republican Party candidate's regional election campaign, Sargsian stated that he had requested annual leave during the pre-election period but was continuing to work in his Marzpet office during the day. In the evenings he walks to the election campaign office which is located on the same square. Sargsian noted that the pre-election campaign had been very quiet and as a result did not require his day to day involvement in campaign activities. There were no campaign posters, flags, or other materials present in or around the offices of the Marzpet.

16. (C) The governor also mentioned that in 2003 there had been orchestrated incidents of election violence in his Marz. To prevent this from recurring, he mentioned preparing the local police to be alert for potential "instigators." In terms of the election turnout, Sargsian believed that the current Prime Minister would win by a large margin followed by the Orinats Yerkir and Armenian Revolutionary Federation (Dashnaks) candidates respectively.

DASHNAKS TO OPPOSE SARGSIAN IN SECOND ROUND

17. (C) Emboffs held a meeting in Artashat with the local office of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF) or "Dashnaksutsyun". ARF representatives noted that regional authorities had created several obstacles for them during the election campaign. Examples included: 1) Not

providing office space for their regional campaign office; 2) Pressure from the Mayor of Azatavan to remove a large ARF campaign banner from his village; and 3) Inability to rent office space in the town of Masis due to pressure from the authorities against building owners.

18. (C) Interestingly, the Artashat branch leader noted that the ARF had come in first place during the 2003 and second place in the 2007 parliamentary elections for Ararat Marz. This was because the ARF had a pre-existing infrastructure there dating back to 1989. As a result, he believed the ARF candidate would fare well on election day. Another factor that contributed to the ARF's positive outlook for Ararat Marz was the unpopularity of Hovik Abrahamian. According to the ARF branch leader, Abrahamian had lost favor with the people of the region when he was Marzpet and profited from corrupt privatization schemes. The ARF representatives believed that in the event of a second round run-off between Serzh Sargsian and a non-ARF candidate, ARF supporters would vote for the opposition candidate -- so long as it was not LTP.

19. (C) The ARF branch leader provided emboffs with a list of suspected trouble areas during the election campaign for Ararat Marz. These include the villages/towns of Ayntap, Marmarashen, Artashat City (polling stations 17/11, 17/02, and 17/03), Mrgavet, Mkhchyan (Hovik Abrahamian's birthplace), Nshavan, Masis, Mrgayan, and Shahumyan. The ARF branch believed that most violations would take place in the afternoon on election day, and would consist of ballot stuffing, vote buying, and fraudulent use of passports. The ARF branch leader also mentioned the possible sale of places on the polling stations' election commissions.

ARARAT MAYOR PAINTS A ROSY PICTURE

110. (SBU) Emboffs traveled to Ararat City (population 24,000) to meet with Republican party mayor Abik Babayan and Orinats Yerkir representatives. During their brief meeting with the recently elected Babayan, the mayor assured emboffs that all candidates were given equal access to municipal resources for their

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campaigns. He also stated that there had been no negative election incidents whatsoever. However, Babayan noted that the decision of local political leader Aram Sargsian (leader of the opposition Republic Party) to join forces with LTP had caused some mixed feelings among the town's population. On the issue of balancing his role in the campaign with his duties as mayor, Babayan noted that he worked as mayor until noon and then proceeded to the local campaign headquarters where he was the leader.

OPPOSITION PICTURE NOT SO ROSY

111. (C) Emboffs held a meeting with Hovsep Abrahamyan and other representatives of the local Orinats Yerkir branch not far from the Ararat Mayor's Office. Several representatives reported their involvement in an election related incident three days earlier, when they attempted to attend a rally for their candidate in Yerevan. They reported having rented two buses to transport supporters to Yerevan, but when they proceeded to depart they were impeded

by local policeman Garik Avetisyan. When the passengers of the bus attempted to arrange their own transport to Yerevan via taxi, the taxis were also ordered by the police to turn around, according to the party activists.

¶12. (C) The Orinats Yerkir office complained that the voters lists in Ararat were inaccurate, and one cited as an example people who used to live in her apartment building, but whom she knew were now living overseas. This included her son and daughter-in-law, whose names were still on the voter's list. An elderly woman at the Orinats Yerkir office stated that her neighbor had been solicited at his door to sell his family's vote in support of Serzh Sargsian but refused due to the small amount of money offered. Lastly, the Orinats Yerkir office complained that the local election commission had only one opposition representative, since the Heritage party seat had been given to a Republican party representative.

¶13. (C) In the event that their candidate did not make it to the second round run-off, the Orinats Yerkir reps stated that their constituency would vote for whomever was the opposition candidate.

LTP RALLY DRAWS NEARLY 2000 IN SMALL TOWN

¶14. (SBU) The LTP rally in the town of Vedi began with a ceremonial visit to a monument dedicated to former prime minister and native son Vazgen Sargsian, who was assassinated in parliament on October 27, 1999. After laying flowers at the monument, LTP and his entourage proceeded to an open air stadium nearby to conduct the rally. Approximately 2000 people were in attendance, including 200 to 300 people who had accompanied LTP from Yerevan. The rally was kicked-off in the usual format with a speech from Nikol Pashinyan, editor-in-chief of the Haykakan Zhamank Newspaper and LTP's customary crowd-warmer. Stepan Demirchyan and Aram Sargsian spoke of the need to find the real perpetrators of the killing of Karen Demirchian and Vazgen Sargsian, implying that the current ruling regime had something to do with it. These sentiments appeared to have resonance in Vazgen Sargsian's hometown of Vedi.

¶15. (C) After rousing the crowd, Aram Sargsian (brother of the deceased Vazgen) yielded the podium to LTP, who was greeted with whoops and cheers of "Levon," "Levon." LTP described events that took place earlier in the day when his rally in Artashat was interrupted by ice-throwing assailants who were reportedly connected to Hovik Abrahamian. LTP characterized the event as a &terrorist act8 conducted by the authorities. The deputy governor had earlier complained to emboffs about the insults directed against local leaders, and how difficult it was for local authorities to restrain themselves from reacting.

¶16. (C) LTP lambasted the ruling regime for its "kleptocratic" practices, and pointed out the number

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of PM Sargsian's cronies that had criminal-like nicknames. Notably absent from this recitation was any mention of oligarch Gagik Tsarukian, founding leader of the Prosperous Armenia party. (COMMENT: Perhaps an olive branch to Tsarukian, whose enthusiasm for the PM has been conspicuously absent. Tsarukian is widely considered an enemy of the PM's brother, Alexander "Sashik" Sargsian, and there has been little evidence of his party's

active support for the PM's candidacy. END
COMMENT).

MASIS

¶17. (U) Emboffs finished their pre-election round up of Ararat Marz with a visit to Territorial Election Commission (TEC) #16 in the town of Masis. The TEC members were pleased to report that no official complaints had been lodged in their area. In addition, they had successfully held mock elections on January 31, and conducted all necessary election training as required by the Central Election Commission (CEC).

COMMENT

¶18. (C) Ararat is a perennial hotbed of election violations and political conflict, a stronghold to both Republican and Republic parties. Much of what we heard in Ararat Marz echoes the trends we are hearing about across the country: a mixture of ruling party strength and organizational competence, but also fierce dissent and alleged abuses. The opposition Republic Party is firmly in LTP's camp, and has its highest concentration of diehards here.
PENNINGTON